Island on the Edge of Eternity
Part Two

By Thien Valdram
Edited by Ostara Gale & Aristide Twain

PUBLISHED BY THE CHESHIRE HOUSE

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The door of Rhyz'ir's house spun open at their mere presence. Though the residence recognised its master, the same was scarcely true of Rhyz'ir themself; the scientist was still dazed with the storm of emotions that swirled within them, the revelations and trepidations. The familiar set of rooms was almost foreign to them, or if not that, then at least changed. With Lotto's intrusion, the wild and fantastical notions which had, to date, resided in Rhyz'ir's notes and dreams alone, had intruded upon the very core of their humdrum existence. Now that wild, tantalising spark clung to every light and every shadow, promising that nothing would ever be the same.

The news were on — quite loud in fact — the presenter's urgent, breathless words substituting for Rhyz'ir's own thoughts as they made their way into the living room, captivating the whole of their attention.

"*…a grand total of eight murders. The security force has thus far been unable to piece together any form of motive for this horrific series of crimes. The victims vary in age, species and profession, and the only link thus far has been the sadistic pleasure the perpetrator seemed to take in each case…*"

At Rhyz'ir's presence, the screen went silent. Lotto was there, in flesh and fur; they'd been watching. As their dissociation faded, the scientist heard the strange creature whimper, obviously concerned by what they'd heard — then the alien turned, looking for the source of the interruption, and spotted Rhyz'ir. At this they bounded up excitedly — then paused, noticing Rhyz'ir's mood.

"I…" Rhyz'ir's mouth opened, a few moments before they realised they didn't know what to say. "Hello again."

Lotto yipped once, returning the greeting, then sat down in front of Rhyz'ir and stared upwards. Somehow, their expectant expression was plain to read, for all that the canine alien represented a species — indeed, an entire biological class — of which Rhyz'ir had never before encountered the like. Lotto, they grasped, wanted to know why Rhyz'ir was back so soon.

"…Nzhi'ax," Rhyz'ir began. They let the word hang in the air a moment, as if hoping it would explain everything to Lotto, as it did to them. At last they elaborated. "She… refused to work with me." More fire crept into the Censere's voice as they replayed the disastrous conversation in the park in

their mind. "She *refused* to accept that I am *right*! Dismissed the very possibility! That Higher-Dimensional Ship out there is proof, plain to see, but she won't accept it — she kept picking and arguing… We quarrelled, I — oh, why can't she see *sense*, even now? You know I'm right, you know the Big Bang happened, why won't she believe me?"

Rhyz'ir paused at Lotto's expression: disapproval. Lotto didn't believe them.

"What? You *told* me I was right. I *know* I'm *right*!"

Lotto merely stared straight on, a deep whine from their throat. Then they barked, harshly. Rhyz'ir's posture slackened.

"I'm sorry," they said — and the apology was quite sincere; being judged by the strange, momentous creature felt all the more disheartening when they didn't understand what they'd done to earn the being's ire. "I'm sorry, I don't understand you…"

Lotto thought for a moment, then, ears flicking, pointed to the screen. Rhyz'ir turned to see, but found only a haze of irregular, two-dimensional shapes in black and white, writhing, coiling, forming and unforming. Lotto seemed to cycle through several alphabets, but none would settle into legible words, dissipating into nothing as quickly as they tried to form.

"Careful," Rhyz'ir stepped in, voice full of concern. "You might hurt yourself — our screens are for emotions and memories; it's hard for even trained Censere to form the most rudimentary writing off-hand. If you could visualise the letters as simple shapes, removed from their meaning, then perhaps — but as long as you cannot divorce one from the other, the meaning interferes with the signal. You see?.

Lotto nodded their understanding — then nodded at the screen again, indicating to Rhyz'ir that their guest was about to try again with a different approach. Before the Censere could question quite how they had grasped that so readily, the screen resolved again into an actual image.

Two figures were arguing. They were both xertonoid — Rhyz'ir wouldn't have thought of them as humanoids, a term which had no known linguistic

basis in the Censere's understanding of the Cosmos. 'Humans' were nowhere listed in the pooled records of the Universal Cooperation Council's signatory civilisations.

Although it took a moment for Rhyz'ir to realise this, this newfound glimpse of unknown species was made all the more exciting by the distinctly different apparels of the pair. The first xertonoid was shrouded in some kind of formal robe, with only their head visible; even their prehensile appendages, not so different in articulation from Censere hands, were concealed by segmented, metallic gauntlets of gleaming gold. What little skin they showed was soft and bare, quite unlike Lotto's; emerging out of that carapace of gold and fine cloth, the pinkish flesh reminded Rhyz'ir of nothing more than a young Censere's inner body, fresh and raw after a moult — but the robed xertonoid's skin did not look quite *that* vulnerable. As for their eyes, which were small and set closely together, they had an intensity which might almost have been a glow; there was something almost stellarian in that imperious stare.

Without the requisite cultural context, Rhyz'ir couldn't say if the being was chafing under that over-opulent garb, or a well-oiled cog in the bureaucratic machine of which this was the proper uniform; if their air of dourness was a sign of unhappiness, or simply the entity's natural mood. One thing was certain, however; the *other* xertonoid had something entirely more casual, more *personal* about them. Their outfit was looser, allowing for a greater range of motion, and it was clearly personalised. Tufts of yellow fur adorned the head, and the eyes, sparkling with life, were fitted with glass lenses set in a frame. Rhyz'ir wondered if they were protective, scientific, or simply corrective.

However fascinating these first impressions might have been to Rhyz'ir, however, it was plain they weren't what Lotto had intended them to notice. Even without context, the dynamic in play between the two pictured individuals was obvious. The one in the robes was in charge — the other one was a subordinate, but not a grunt or a drone, and they were arguing, talking *back*. Moreover — where was this certainty as to the subtleties of the aliens' body language coming from? — Rhyz'ir could tell the cheek was unnecessary,

could tell from the expressions that the casual one was just being difficult, without even serious rebellion in their heart.

Lotto pointed to the casual one, then to themselves.

"That's… you?" Rhyz'ir asked, surprised again at their own certainty.

Lotto nodded, then gestured to the scene again.

"You… how did you change…"

Lotto raised a paw to their head. *That* gesture, at least, was nigh on universal: Rhyz'ir was missing the point.

And then the sentiment finally hit them.

"You're saying I'm the problem, aren't you. This is your past… This is your past, and I'm dwelling on mine."

Lotto nodded, relieved that they'd finally gotten through. For a moment, Rhyz'ir was tempted to dwell on that. There had been more than charades to that exchange; it was as though the alien had tried, and finally succeeded, in effecting actual, direct thought transference, even across their two, radically different brains. For once, however, their mind was elsewhere, far from the mind-boggling implications of that suspicion.

"I — yes, I know I can be difficult," Rhyz'ir argued, their tone heated. "Prickly, eccentric — but look now, *she* — what she's always —"

Lotto shook their head, then gestured squarely at Rhyz'ir.

Rhyz'ir didn't even need to say it. The truth of the matter had begun to set in. They'd cared more about being right than anything else; they had refused to compromise. And they'd blown up, single-minded and unforgiving, when Nzhi'ax had dared to point out *that* truth.

They needed to apologise. Yes, they knew that now, with a sudden, immediate clarity.

"Oh dear," they said to themself, and then added: "Thank you, Lotto. I… needed that."

Lotto followed as they made for the door; Rhyz'ir noticed as they reached the threshold, and turned halfway.

"No, you can — you can stay here…"

But Lotto was out the door before Rhyz'ir could do anything about it, barking as if calling for Rhyz'ir to follow.

"…Alright, fine," they gave in, trotting. "Just, ahem, don't draw too much attention to yourself. Remember, mammals *are* extinct in this time-zone".

Lotto nodded again in acknowledgement and the two headed back for the tube station. Emotionally fraught moment or not, Rhyz'ir could not suppress a giddy thrill at speaking of discretion and time-zones; even without having set foot outside their home year, they were beginning to feel like the indomitable time-agent of their wildest childhood fantasies. Just them and their unprecedented alien friend, dashing through the streets on vital business — oh yes, that felt *right*.

Except it didn't.

Not without Nzhi'ax.

* * *

Joining a pacified, friendly Nzhi'ax in the list of things that should have been there, but weren't, was the Higher-Dimensional Ship. Rhyz'ir and Lotto beheld the obvious as soon as they entered the park, but ran all the way to the edge of the spot it had occupied, gazing upon the almost comical square imprint it had left, the dents in the substance of the walkways. Then they shared a look. At last, Rhyz'ir spoke. There was only one thing to say, and this time, they were confident Lotto would grasp the implications.

"Nzhi'ax…"

Nzhi'ax. Nzhi'ax, always *Nzhi'ax*.

"Gods damn it!"

Rhyz'ir threw their Tachyon Jumpoff Detector against the ground.

"I'm so stupid!" they cried out. "I should never have trusted her —"

Their eyes met Lotto's, and they sensed the alien's concern at this line of thinking.

"Don't you see?" they blew up at the quadruped. "If she's worked out how to fly the Ship, she'll be in Locus by now — and she'll make her reports, and the Council will bury that ship like they do anything they don't understand. It's what she said she'd do. I thought I'd got her on my side, but now —"

Rhyz'ir paused in their rant for just a moment. Now what? Now *they* had pushed her away. They had reneged on their deal, not Nzhi'ax. Yes. That was right.

Yes — but a promise was a promise, and this thievery was more than a spat between friends could justify. Rhyz'ir knew they'd been abrasive, they would admit it, they'd been ready to apologise — but for Nzhi'ax betray them again, after knowing how much it had hurt them before? After she'd promised?

"…*Now*!…" they shouted impotently, half-sob, half-roar.

Then anger turned to defeat as Rhyz'ir fell to their knees at the edge of the squarish markings.

"W-hat… what do I *do* now…"

Lotto barked sharply, and Rhyz'ir turned, confused, to meet their eyes.

"…Mh?"

Lotto barked again. Rhyz'ir's mind was too clouded with turmoil to interpret it in full, but this time, no mistake — they felt the hazy shape of a psychic message prodding at their consciousness. A call to action.

They sobbed again, a bitter laugh. *What* action?

"It's over," they explained in a hollow voice, as if to a child. "She's gone, Lotto. Back to Locus."

But Lotto fixed a determined gaze on them, then growled, before barking an order.

"You want me to follow her?"

Lotto nodded.

"B-but how?" Rhyz'ir's mind whirred. "Well, I *am* an accredited physicist, I suppose I *do* have the authority to requisition a H.D. vessel… but why would I — I mean, what could I — why do you want me… ?"

They trailed off, staring at the strange mammal yet again. Why *was* Lotto so determined not to let them give up? Was it simply kindness, some sense of childlike enthusiasm? Was there something they weren't seeing? There was no coming back from this. Any real sway they had with the authorities would have been through the favours they were owed by Nzhi'ax herself. Even if they got to Locus on her heels, Rhyz'ir would be powerless to impede her research. There was nothing they could *do*…

…except speak their mind. Except do whatever they *could*.

Yes, quite right. *Quite* right. They couldn't let that traitor get away with it, not after what she had done to them, twice over..

This had been their chance to finally prove they were worth something as a scientist, finally prove their whole career wasn't all for nothing. And Nzhi'ax had taken it away from them. Who cared about a plan? Who cared about what would be left of their career once they were through? It was up in flames already. They may as well go down shining.

Rhyz'ir turned and set off, Lotto in tow.

* * *

Several Censere, and indeed one or two members of other species, watched in mild interest and confusion as the completely unknown animal followed Rhyz'ir towards the Cradle.

"Syias," Rhyz'ir announced — with a desperate sort of matter-of-factness — as they approached the main desk of the Cradle, "I need to requisition a Higher-Dimensional Ship."

Syias turned to them in confusion. He was one of the Ales-san, a diminutive avian species from the small jungle-world of Sheayn, which orbited a red star near the centre of the Universal Island. At only ten million

years old, the Ales-san were the youngest culture in the Universal Cooperation Council, and as such, by far the most reclusive, tending to stick to their own systems. Very few Ales-san were ever seen this far from their homeworld, but Syias was an exception, and a welcome one; he had grown to be a cherished acquaintance of Rhyz'ir.

Nothing in their years of easy, professional friendship had prepared Syias for the blunt request.

"Rhyz'ir? …You? A Ship?" Syias blinked rapidly, finding himself unable to stop his head from cocking to and fro in a distinctly birdlike way — an Ales-san's instinctive reaction to a situation it couldn't understand. Syias was literally trying to see all the angles. That disposition was part of what made him such a competent Cradle administrator, although Rhyz'ir wouldn't have dreamed of reducing their friend's skill to their species. "…*Really*? Are you sure? You've never… What do you need it for?"

"It'd take too long to explain, and you wouldn't believe half of it."

Syias nodded and grasped for a form. "Very well," he said, "when will you need it?"

"I *do* need it," Rhyz'ir corrected; they were fidgeting, as if forcing themself to stay composed civil were taking a considerable effort. "I need it *now*. Syias, I can't explain it, but I need a ship, *right now*."

"I — well, it's quite irregular, but —" Syias looked down at Lotto for a moment, and froze. "Say, Rhyz'ir, what is…?"

"*Now,* Syias!" Rhyz'ir yelled.

Syias seemed almost… impressed. He dove back behind his desk, saying no more about the furry quadruped; when he reemerged, it was to throw Rhyz'ir a key.

"I'm gonna get in trouble for skipping the formalities but — *there*. Now go."

* * *

The pair made quick work of locating the Higher-Dimensional Ship they had been assigned; they might have been standard scientific equipment of a sort, but their use was infrequent enough that even a research base like Titan only had half a dozen in stock.

Even compared to the wooden shed, there was something oddly unromantic to Rhyz'ir about the bulky, gunmetal-coloured contraption. Lotto didn't seem impressed either; as they opened the sliding door and climbed in, the alien seemed visibly disappointed with the size of the interior, walking around it a few times as if making sure. Rhyz'ir looked on in mild confusion; the interior control room was the exact size and shape one would expect from looking at the machine from the outside. Was this mammal used to other arrangements?

Rhyz'ir had never requisitioned a ship, so it had been years since they'd seen the controls, but they *had* aced every H.D. piloting test they'd sat throughout their education. Besides, Locus was an inordinately easy location to set coordinates for, being, as it was, pretty much at the dead centre of the Universal Island, or near enough without falling into the binary Supermassive Black Hole system which occupied the actual epicentre.

"Now, let me see," they said, getting their thoughts in order as they prepared to put a hand to the controls — "simply plug in the coordinates and set…"

Then they recoiled, an instinctive reaction, before they even knew what the large shape that had just appeared in front of them had been. They shook themself and realised that Lotto had jumped up, onto the console — and was now busily tweaking the levers and dials.

"You… are trained to fly this sort of craft?" Rhyz'ir asked, agog.

Lotto answered with a business-like bark, and flicked the final lever with a paw.

They were off.

* * *

Locus was the capital world of the Universal Island, and had been for longer than all surviving intelligent life had existed, save for the Censere themselves.

When the Sun of the Censere's previous home system, a rare yellow-white star with a lifespan of only 2 billion years, had finally died, their original homeworld had been subsumed in the resulting Red Giant. Forewarned by the sublimity of their science, the Censere had left their world in search of another — and after generations of searching, their ark-ships had found Locus.

It had fallen some way short of the Promised Land, that almost barren planet they had landed on; it had been an expanse of sandy desert wastes, with only the occasional oasis to sustain a few scraps of surviving plant life. Its star system was binary, consisting of a red dwarf, and a larger, albeit frozen, star. Even at its zenith, the red dwarf could only colour the sky a twilight, titian hue; as for the frozen star, it barely glowed, for its metallicity was so high that the metals in its core dampened almost all the light before it reached the surface. Elsewhere in the universe, there were frozen stars that were large enough and cold enough that a non-stellerian civilisation could live on their surface, but Locus's cold sun was still too hot and too small for that. In consequence, all it did was sit there and eclipse the red dwarf on the hour, plunging Locus into darkness each time it did.

For all that, however, Locus had possessed one feature that made it the immediate choice for a core world: the ruins. They were not only the evidence that at one time, some other race had found a home here, braving the winds and the wilderness — they were the only intact remnants of any civilisation predating the Censere. They were the relics of the only form of sapient life predating their own which the Censere had ever proven beyond a reasonable doubt. (A certain stellarian species, of course, which was older yet, still resided within Sol; but the Censere had no inkling of their existence — and, tragically, they wouldn't learn of it until the solar beings had been wiped out by a catastrophe which would go on to baffle U.C.C. science for centuries.)

The Locus ruins were ground to almost nothing; they were the shattered remnants of a city which had once stood atop a crater, now laying

haphazardly within it. Yet the large, innocuous-looking metallic scaffolding and glass shards comprised by the wreckage were nigh on indestructible. Moreover, no archaeologists could make sense of the site, the apparent architecture of the various fragments irreconcilable with the lay of the land; there was evidence of more numerous and titanic monuments than could ever have fit within the crater at the same time.

There was, in short, a *mystery* here, a taste of something ancient and mighty; the Censere, weary of expending their wits for survival alone after their long exodus, could not *possibly* walk away from it. They had stuck around, and little by little, a new city had sprung up around them, filling the crater before spreading outwards as it grew.

In the process, they had found more pieces of the ancient puzzle. The crater ruins were by far the most impressive, but there were at least fifteen major ruin sites across Locus — a combination of settlements, estates, and other structures. All fragmentary, their meaning all but inscrutable; nonetheless, all of vital historical and cultural importance to the Censere.

It was atop one of these buildings, built up against a ravaged metal spire one hundred billion years in age, that the Censere Higher-Dimensional Ship materialised in silence. A flurry of dots appeared on the control screen — the H.D. vessel's brethren, sitting in their berths in the Cradles around the prehistoric crater. That gave Rhyz'ir pause for just a moment; if their Ship could detect the others, then its presence, in turn, would have been detected. Oh, well, they thought — it couldn't be helped, and after all, as a credentialed scientist, they had every right to be here. They only wished they had the wherewithal to think of a good lie if the nature of their current work was questioned.

But it was quite impossible for them to focus on such mundane affairs for now. Rhyz'ir had never actually been to Locus. All they knew of it was information they'd accessed from the communication networks supplied by the Universal Cooperation Council. As they stepped out of the Ship in a silence that was born out of reverence moreso than wariness, the sight of the binary stars hanging in the sky was enough to render them speechless.

Their attention quickly turned to the ancient spire itself. Even worn and rusted, the polished, vertical slate of metal made a sharp contrast with the more rounded, organic Censere architecture of the surrounding structures. It transcended artless brutalism, tasting instead of a sense of the *absolute* which should not have been possible outside of a mathematical model; cast all in one piece, it was less of a physical building, and more of humongous geometrical shape embedded into the bedrock of Locus. What titans, what austere gods had wrought this masterpiece? They were still staring at it when Lotto emerged from the H.D. vessel, perhaps a full minute after Rhyz'ir themself. The alien glanced over at the metal wall, and even they looked strangely awed for a moment before barking Rhyz'ir to attention.

"Right," Rhyz'ir nodded, tearing their eyes away from the spire. "I've never been here before, but according to the official floor plans, Nzhi'ax's lab is three hundred and fifty two floors down."

There was no need for telepathy to grasp Lotto's displeasure at that revelation.

"Oh, there should be an elevator just out there," Rhyz'ir reassured the mammal — and, to make good on the promise, they directed a thought at the nearest Cradle doors.

Obediently, they slid open.

The Censere in charge of the cradles paid them little mind, giving Lotto a glance which fell some way short of suspicion; it conveyed mild intrigue at best, and was not enough for the guard to stop them over. Rhyz'ir had expected as much. They could not have gotten here unless they were a properly credentialed scientist; a credentialed scientist would not enter a Locus Cradle without legitimate cause; ergo, there was no cause for alarm.

The two entered the elevator, which began to descend with no need for buttons or levers. The elevator shaft had been designed for safety over speed, but it was built into the far edge of the building; a window overlooking the rest of Locus meant that its passengers were rarely displeased with the leisurely pace at which it slid down to its destination. As they journeyed downward, Lotto padded over to the window and stared out, eyes wide and

ears alert; Rhyz'ir felt strangely comforted that even their visitor from out of Time apparently found the Locus Ruins to be an awe-inspiring sight.

"You know, I always wondered what it actually looked like," they commented, about halfway down; their tone was hushed, even then, treating the mood of the moment like a sacred, precious thing which feckless chatter might have fractured. "It had always been a dream of mine to come here, once I'd proven myself right and earned a spot… I guess… I suppose Nzhi'ax took *that* from me, too.".

Lotto whimpered. Outside, the red star passed behind a ferris-like circle of cyclopean proportions, built into another of the ancient monuments for reasons long since forgotten. For a few, entrancing moments, the metal ring was an iris around the blazing pupil of that eye. Rhyz'ir felt keenly that they were being judged, and shrank from the illusory gaze — which forced them to lock eyes with Lotto once more."

"…You were right," they admitted. "I did treat her unfairly. But — that doesn't excuse what she did. I will *not* let her get away with it again. I will not let history repeat itself, do you understand?"

She had promised. Promised she wouldn't do it again, promised they were friends again — but then she had done it. She *had*. And they were hurt, and they were angry, and it was all her fault.

"Do you — do you *understand*?" they asked again, a little more desperately.

As they looked again, they realised Lotto hadn't been listening; their eyes had remained fixed on the city outside. There was a dull, sustained, keening sound under the canine's breath; the alien almost seemed to be in a state of shock.

"…Lotto? Are you alr —"

Rhyz'ir's realisation was interrupted by the elevator coming to a stop, and Lotto snapped themself out of it, barking at the door until Rhyz'ir opened it with a thought.

In front of the pair, as they walked out, were the familiar signs affixed at all significant junctures of academic complexes to help direct wayward students

and academics to their intended destinations. They used the same font here as they did on Titan; Rhyz'ir almost laughed at that recognition.

* * *

'*Astronomy and Cosmology Laboratory #76*'.

The unglamorous name was inscribed on the door, precisely as it had appeared among the directions at the elevator, except in slightly larger print. There was little in the clinical design of the sign or the plain plywood door it adorned which tallied with the trepidation which the sight of it sparked within Rhyz'ir.

They braced themself.

This confrontation would not be pretty, they knew that. Their relationship with Nzhi'ax, insofar as it might still be salvageable, would be destroyed forever. It had to be done — from a certain point of view it had been already — and yet they froze, in front of that stupid-looking door, such a far cry from the skyline outside.

They almost jumped at a sudden sensation; Lotto had placed one of their limb-tips — their *paw*, if Rhyz'ir wasn't mistaken — on the side of their leg. Odd placement, but Rhyz'ir understood the gesture.

They took a breath, then pushed a thought into the door. It spun open.

* * *

The sight hit them just moments before the smell.

At least three Censere, lying face down in puddles of their own green blood, exoskeletons torn open. Dead, all, and not in some tragic lab accident. Butchered. *Murdered.*

"By the gods…"

Lotto seemed to be more keenly affected than even Rhyz'ir, stumbling back in revulsion; their nose, the Censere realised, was highly sensitive, and the whole room had the acrid smell of cooling blood.

As Rhyz'ir slowly walked in, more bodies revealed themselves; not just Censere, but a few arboreals, now just smouldering ash, and a couple of reptiles of different species, bleeding reds and blues and purples. There was even a stellarian, their glowing yellow blood melting into the floor as it spilled from the open wound that had snuffed out their light forever.

The Higher-Dimensional Ship stood in the middle of the room; Rhyz'ir no longer saw an innocuous, almost quaint-looking shed but a menacing, jagged shape, a disguise whose absurdity relative to its new sterile, indoor setting seemed like a grisly taunt. The sleek, modern scanners and other such equipment which the ill-fated research team had positioned around their deadly prize seemed like so many chrome-plated toys; many had been knocked over without a care in the world.

The front door of the shed was ajar.

Before Rhyz'ir knew what they were doing, they approached the piles of cadavers, even daring to touch a few bodies to turn them over. Lotto barked a warning, but Rhyz'ir didn't stop. They needed to know — needed to know if Nzhi'ax was among the dead. They didn't know if they hoped or feared to see that familiar face as they turned over one dead Censere, and then the next; but they *had* to know. They needed *closure*.

Though the slaughter was unconscionable, there were few in the room in absolute terms, and fewer Censere yet. Soon enough, they drew back, certain that Nzhi'ax was not among the victims. Perhaps she had fled, perhaps she had not even been in the room when bladed Death had erupted from its wooden cocoon — but there was another possibility, and Rhyz'ir knew they could not live with themself unless they checked it, even as Lotto's barking heightened in a frantic crescendo and the quadruped bounded after them as if to stop them.

The front door of the shed was ajar.

Out of some superstitious fear, they squeezed their eyes shut as they crossed the threshold — and opened them again with a start.

"So *that*'s why…!"

They didn't elaborate, upset at themself for letting that much slip out; the muttered exclamation might have cost them the element of surprise already. But they were, after all, a scientist before all else. And here was an answer. This, *this* was why the peculiar signatures which had surrounded the Ship in the park had not even begun to dissipate, no matter how long the machine stood at rest. *Permanent dimensional engineering*, on a scale the Censere could never manage. The ship's interior was almost pitch black, but the chilly breeze which wafted from its depths and blew at Rhyz'ir's face was enough to tell: it was *massive*.

To Rhyz'ir's relief, Lotto crossed the threshold after them instead of trying to beckon them out again — and then the doors snapped shut, like jaws around prey. Neon lights blinked on behind translucent walls, illuminating a robed figure who stood at an altar at the centre of the cavernous room.

It was all Rhyz'ir could do not to shout. Nzhi'ax was tied to that altar on her back, her mouth bound shut. The lights coming on seemed to startle her out of a daze, and she looked around, as much as her bonds permitted, soon catching sight of Rhyz'ir. Her antennae stiffened in shock and she mewled a muffled cry, but she could form no words with her mouth-parts secured together.

"It won't do you any good, Nzhia dear," the robed figure tutted. "You made your choice. Now won't you be a good girl, and let me have a civil conversation with our guests? *There's* a nice little sacrificial lamb."

The being's words were accompanied with a strange buzz on the edge of Rhyz'ir's mind, a buzz which was not sound — the same kind of fuzzy ache as that which they'd felt as Lotto's mind probed into their own. They might almost have failed to notice it, but now they focused on it — ah, of course. This was no telepathy; the words had been spoken aloud. But the figure was not speaking Censere, or any language Rhyz'ir had ever learned. It was only by some mysterious sorcery that the alien sounds were making sense to them; whatever mouthparts that mask concealed, they were sure, could not even have pronounced the Censere phrases Rhyz'ir had thought they'd heard.

Who was this creature? *What* was it? That uncanny feeling, that understanding of things Rhyz'ir shouldn't have known, was the least of the

ways in which it felt… *wrong*. Rhyz'ir tried to take in the sight, finding it strangely difficult to focus their gaze on Nzhi'ax's captor. The robes were midnight-black with hints of red, and the figure they concealed stood a foot or two so shorter than the seven-foot Censere — or would have done, were it not for the unsettling metal helmet it wore.

The helm was forged in the rough image of a face, but not the face of any species Rhyz'ir knew; the top of the head was adorned with two, parallel shapes which they first took to be antennae, but which, at a second glance, had more in common with Lotto's auditory appendages, those external "ears" which Rhyz'ir had read were quite common among mammalians. Most unsettling was the carved mouth, whose metal lips were parted to reveal rows of gleaming teeth. As readily as they had understood the being's words, Rhyz'ir knew this to be a mammalian's grin — a crazed, predatory one which matched its owner's actions and the glint of madness behind the eye-holes.

What little skin the being displayed — and it really was very little indeed; for a moment, Rhyz'ir thought back to the gold-clad supervisor from Lotto's memories, though in all other respects the two xertonoids were polar opposites — was a sickly shade of purple. The same was true of the tufts of hair which erupted from the top of their head, which were wild and uncombed; the Censere could not imagine that these filaments had a sensory function, or the being would not tolerate those tangles and knots.

"I knew you'd come," the robed man said —

— and as he spoke, Rhyz'ir felt a little more understanding, a little more context trickling into their mind without their consent. Yes, here was a *man*, a *he*; his voice was mature, but not hoarse or unpleasant; in fact, there was a striking, velvet smoothness to it. His accent was cosmopolitan, his elocution impeccable; yet he was, too, so very casual; there was no sense of ceremony to his tone, despite the altar, nor even of menace. He might have been talking to a friend at a bar.

"She said you wouldn't come, you know," he went on in the same, conversational register. "But I knew you would — I've been watching you, you see."

"…Who are you?"

Rhyz'ir had to force the words out of their throat, eyes locked on the alien madman. In his left hand was a frighteningly simple object — a small, polished knife, its blade coated in green Censere blood. He twirled it like a toy as he laughed.

"Oh, where are my manners? You can call me Reinbrand."

He tossed the knife in the air, and caught it by the handle with easy grace.

"Not that it's my real name. Not the name I had. Used to have. Should have had… Still, I'm used to it."

He ran his finger along the ritual knife, wiping off some green blood. Now they'd seen it, the weapon was all Rhyz'ir could stare at.

"You don't mind if I work while we talk, do you, bug?" he said, seeming to stifle a manic laugh. "It's not all fun and games, you've got to take care of your tools." He paused — giggled. "No, let's be fair — it's *mostly* fun and games, I admit it. Well, fun for me, at any rate. But you get it, don't you? I saw you outside, you hardly flinched when you saw my latest work. Just got on with business. I like that in a man — now *Tirion*! There was a guy who couldn't see the funny side. And we all know what happened to *him*…"

He gave the knife a long wipe against the fabric of his sleeve, and froze comically.

"No, scratch that, I haven't the faintest idea what ever became of the old boy. You haven't seen him around, have you? Big fellow. Big teeth. *Claws*. No? Make sure to check under your bed!"

The more he spoke, the more Rhyz'ir was struck by Reinbrand's voice; it was the smoothest the Censere had ever heard. The sound seemed to march through the space in between at its own, chosen pace; each word was articulated with the perfection of one who had studied in the courts of the Devil for many years. All to express such feckless evil —

"You… you're the murderer, back on Titan," Rhyz'ir breathed out, finding some hint of comfort in the sound of their own, simpler voice. "That was *you*."

"Of course. Nor was it just sport, I'm sorry to say, or revenge. Self-preservation, old chap! I was badly hurt in the crash — I needed to heal myself. Ah, extracting life-force is a relatively simple technique, and it works perfectly well across species… One of the few skills I picked up from studying who I was — ahem — meant to be. Mh."

Reinbrand scowled for a moment; Rhyz'ir couldn't make sense of his words, but there was, clearly enough, something there he hadn't meant to let slip.

"Oh, well, this really isn't about me — well, it *is,* but it's *also* about the both of you."

Without warning, he drove the knife into Nzhi'ax's leg, piercing through chitin like butter. The rope around her jaw could not silence her scream —her green blood spilt onto the altar and seeped into the porous stone. Within seconds, the walls began to shake as the neon lights grew brighter.

Lotto barked in protest and Reinbrand laughed, seeming to notice him for the first time.

"Oh, *say*! Oh, I don't believe it. Really? You brought the *mutt*? Whatever for!?" With a lazy flick of the knife, still slick with the whimpering Nzhi'ax's blood, he pointed at Lotto themself. "And *you*. You came back? After barely managing to get away last time? Dear, dear, dear. I think, perhaps, that wasn't wise…"

Lotto responded with a growl, baring their own, genuine teeth to match the masked one's frozen grin. For the first time, they noticed that their four-legged companion's teeth were far more jagged, far more *functional* than the flat abstractions on the helmet. They were far more akin to the two, large fangs which adorned a Censere's mouth-parts than Rhyz'ir had expected. And had there been so many?

"Ha! We're in a mood, are we, little doggy?" Reinbrand laughed again, seemingly unconcerned by those rows of sharp teeth's potential to rip out of his throat. "You style yourself a detective, don't you — a proper little bloodhound, sniffing out the trail. Was it worth it? All the way here, to the end of the universe? I trust you took in the scenery! You see, now? What

goes around comes around. The Archons destroyed our home — now yours lies in ruins. *Hell*, but it feels good." He paused. "But not for you, I would imagine. Eh?" There was venom in Reinbrand's words, a mounting tension. "Well? Tell me, lapdog! *How does it feel*?!"

He spat those last words, quite literally — droplets of spit shot out of their mouth through the cracks in the mask. They landed on the black floor, and for a moment, Rhyz'ir swore they could hear them *sizzle*.

As quickly as they'd looked down, Rhyz'ir looked up again, looking the madman in the eye. "L-leave them alone," they stammered. "*Both of them*. If you were waiting for me, then — here I am. Just tell me what you want!"

"Both of them?" Reinbrand seemed almost puzzled, but Rhyz'ir knew by now that it was all so much theatre. "Oh, *her*! You still care about her, do you? You want me to let her go, after everything she did to you? How charming.. How disarmingly *quaint*."

The knife still firmly gripped in his other hand, the murderer bent down to cup his captive's face.

"Do you hear that, old girl? Your buggy little friend has come to rescue you. Quite the dashing hero… He even brought a *pet*. But you — you're not quite the innocent damsel, are you? Should we tell them?"

Nzhi'ax let out a sound that might have been protest, despair, or simply pain, squeezing her cheeks tighter as he crooned.

"No? Well, *I* think we should tell them." He rose again to his full height. "I think you should know, Rhyz'ir — I didn't *abduct* her, or whatever you imagined. It was her choice to come here. I just flew the ship. She was *ever* so angry at you when I met her. She positively jumped at the chance to betray you."

Rhyz'ir looked over at Nzhi'ax, who averted her gaze in shame.

It was true, then. She had betrayed them. Perhaps —

Perhaps she deserved this…

Rhyz'ir shut down the thought without examination.

"Even if that's true," they declared, "she doesn't — deserve this. Let her go, Reinbrand!"

"Almost no one I've killed deserves it. It's not *about* who deserves it. It's just how the story goes — and men like me, we get to change things. We get to choose how the story goes… I have a proposal for you, my chitinous friend." Reinbrand gestured at Nzhi'ax like an auctioneer flaunting a bauble. "Look at her. Really look. What have we here? I'll tell you: the fly in your ointment, the woman who threw your life off-course. She betrayed you, twice. What if I told you that you could undo it all? What would you give to have your life back?"

"…What?"

Rhyz'ir paused. The man was insane, that much was obvious, but he was also — they wouldn't say, wouldn't even think the word 'warlock'. But the man had worked wonders, albeit dark ones; he had come from forgotten times of myth and legend. This was no idle lie; somehow, some way, he could do what he claimed. Rhyz'ir would swear to it. And their head was still filled with anger, moreso now that the shock from the slaughter outside was beginning to wear off.

To undo what had happened between them —

What a dream.

What would they give? What *wouldn't* they give to undo it all and start over?

"Well? I'm waiting. Time is precious in my business; you don't know how much."

Rhyz'ir tried to open their mouth, but Lotto was quicker, barking in renewed protest and padding between Rhyz'ir and the altar as if to protect one from the other.

"You stay out of this, *slave*," the murderer hissed. "Be warned, the only reason I haven't spilled your guts across my altar is that I don't think you're worth the effort. Look at that pint-size body they sewed you up in! You're pathetic — even the other Archons thought so!"

Lotto shrank back; they stood their ground, but looked less defiant, now. Almost wounded.

"Ahem —" Rhyz'ir spoke up, "Reinbrand — before we make any deals, a condition. Leave Lotto alone. They've done nothing to you."

"Only because they're too weak to hurt me," the murderer replied. "But fine. If you must."

Rhyz'ir exhaled, trying not to think about the fact that Lotto looked less than perfectly grateful for these negotiations — trying not to look into the pleading, bleeding Nzhi'ax's eyes.

"Alright," they said, "what do you want me to do?"

Lotto whimpered in distress, but Reinbrand ignored them, and snapped his fingers imperiously. There was a sharp clank; Rhyz'ir turned round to find that the doors of the Ship had opened again, revealing —

"B-but this is Titan," they said, uncomprehending. "The Second Settlement — these are our halls, our old laboratory complex… How did you —"

"Did you think the flashing lights were just for show?" Reinbrand scoffed, impatient. "Ships such as mine have no need of controls and numbers. Just power, and thought… The only true currencies. I've taken us back in time, bug, to the final year of your education. The very day she betrays you. The deal is simple: step out there, do one thing for me, and I give you… everything."

"Everything?" Rhyz'ir blinked. "What do you mean, 'everything'?

"All the data you need to prove that theory of yours," he spelled out. "I don't understand the half of that science crap — but the Ship holds all the information you need."

Rhyz'ir's head was spinning. In that moment, they almost forgot about what Reinbrand had done at the lab, what he'd done to Nzhi'ax just now. *Everything*; the word sounded just right. And yet —

— even now, they weren't stupid. They weren't *blind*.

"What do you want me to do?" they snapped.

"Something exquisitely simple," Reinbrand crooned. "Take this knife, go out there — and kill her. Kill her before she can ever betray you"

"Y… you want me to… what!?" Rhyz'ir sputtered, aghast as much as frightened. "But that's a paradox…"

"*Exactly,*" said Reinbrand, with a hungry look. "Exactly so. Don't you see? *So am I.* So's this ship. She and I are what the Gods call… *Fallen.*"

Lotto let out a hateful yap at the mention of that word.

"Fallen off… Fallen out of time," Reinbrand went on, waving his arm about with less controlled precision than before; he was pacing, talking to himself as much as Rhyz'ir. "Out of time, off the map, off our rocker, whatever you like. Ours is a House of aberrations, a home for the homeless. That's how I like to think of it. Look at me — the ghost of a man who never should have been," he said, striking a pose, his purple hands held in front of his face, wrists together as if they'd been manacles. "But there's power in that. Power in what shouldn't be. Power we can *use*. If you burn down the world, you make heat, don't you see? I couldn't go out there and kill your friend before her time. I'm a ghost and a virus. History would heal and boot me out. But you? Oh, *boy*, if *you* do it… There'll be fireworks. Enough firepower to rocket me right out of the ass-end of History and back somewhere *fun*."

"I — I don't understand," Rhyz'ir pointed out. "You *have* a Ship. You moved us through time! Haven't you killed enough? Why do you need *more*?"

"Oh, sure, I can move within this wretched epoch of yours on a half-empty tank," Reinbrand replied. "But to break *out*? There are walls, bug. Barriers in Time, sealing off your centuries from the ones I call home. Count yourselves lucky for that — it's not all sunshine and roses where I'm from, let me tell you."

"Clearly," Rhyz'ir blurted out with a pointed look at the knife-wielding maniac — which seemed to annoy him.

"Look, do you want a blessed *lecture*?! You have my deal. *Choose*!"

Rhyz'ir paused, the command resonating in their mind like a funeral bell.

They could rewrite it all, undo everything. Get the information and give it to their younger self.

Erase the decades of ridicule…

…Erase?

"What happens to me?" they asked. "If I take your deal. If I give my younger self the knowledge. What happens to *me*? Do I become… like you?"

"One of the Fallen?" Reinbrand seemed amused by the idea. "That would be a sight. Could happen. Might not. We'll see, won't we? But that kid out there beyond those doors — the real you — they'll have the life you always yearned for. Isn't that enough?"

And it *was*; that was the terrible thing. Rhyz'ir felt it down to their core. They could give themself the greatest prize of all. The life they wanted, the life they deserved.

Nzhi'ax… Nzhi'ax would be gone. Rhyz'ir felt an ache in their chest as they thought of that. But — but she'd betrayed them! Stolen the life they deserved and left them to live on a cold, dark backwater whilst she waltzed off to Locus to become a respected astrophysicist. And it hadn't been a fluke, a moment of weakness, she'd done it *again*, and it *hurt* —

She had *stolen* their *life*. They would only be stealing it back, and if they had to kill to get what was theirs…

Not sport, not revenge. Self-preservation.

The thoughts were swirling; the whole room seemed to be spinning, its shadows a hypnotic vortex. It *hurt*, and they were so angry.

They were no murderer, not at heart. Of course not.

But it only took a moment…

Lotto whimpered, echoed by the bleeding Nzhi'ax on the altar. No matter. She was just a bad future, a grisly ghost to be dissipated. The real Nzhi'ax was out there, in those old halls, ready to betray them. Ready to kill or be killed. Their head *hurt* —

They couldn't live with the guilt if they went through with it. Of *course* not.

But they wouldn't have to, would they? They would Fall, out of the world, in gentle oblivion. Their wounded soul didn't matter; their life was a dead end, a bad dream. They hadn't been *living* for years, not really, just traipsing on, entombed on an ice-moon. They couldn't go on, and they *wouldn't have to.* The *real* Rhyz'ir was out there, so young, so full of hope.

They could undo it all. Could give that kid a proper future. *Rhyz'ir would never know what they had done…*

"I'll… do it."

Rhyz'ir's heart stilled for half a beat as the sound of their own voice reached their conscious mind. They'd said that out loud. They'd chosen. They'd heeded the command — and the shadows stilled, the room stopped spinning. For a moment they thought they saw a swarm of ghostly spirits circling Reinbrand; thought they could feel those hungry, alien, invisible things leaving his side and washing forward, crashing into them like a wave, so *thrilled* —

Reinbrand grinned a wide, toothy grin,

"…*Perfect*!"

He ran over, handing them the knife like an excited child. It felt just right in their hand.

"Go out there," Reinbrand repeated, "kill her, come back — and I'll give you what you want. Then you can trot along, pass it on to your younger self — and our business will be concluded."

They were halfway out of the Ship, *running*, knife in hand, when Lotto *barked.* Something stirred within Rhyz'ir at the sound of the obvious plea, and they looked at Reinbrand one more time.

"I'm — I'm taking Lotto with me," they stated. "I don't trust you with them."

"Oh, do what you *like*," Reinbrand said with a scowl and an impatient shrug. "They're not at *all* important."

But he sheathed his knife with obvious annoyance, and as Rhyz'ir ran out of the cursed place in earnest, they couldn't help but feel that the time-hopping maniac had been looking forward to dissecting an 'Archon' — if that was what Lotto really was. There seemed to be some great and weighty history between Reinbrand's kind and Lotto's.

But no matter. They had business of their own.

As soon as the door of the Ship had closed, Rhyz'ir set off, and Lotto barked accusingly.

"Oh, come *on*!" Rhyz'ir snapped, refusing to slow down. "You're the one who told me not to give up. Well, here I am, not giving up."

It was clear Lotto didn't buy that attempt to shift the blame. They scowled at Rhyz'ir.

"Lotto…" Rhyz'ir said; they were surprised at how harsh their own voice sounded, and not just because the lingering shock and the brisk pace of their walk had made them short of breath. "Nzhi'ax stabbed me in the back! I have *nothing* because of her! I don't — I don't *want* to do this, but if I do… if I *do*, I'll never have to live with any of it! I don't *want* to live with any of it anymore!"

Rhyz'ir stared at the knife, willing themself to go on.

Lotto whimpered, and then rubbed their head against Rhyz'ir's leg. Such a simple gesture, and yet —

— and yet, they could've sworn the mammal had touched their mind as they did, because they had a rush of emotions not of their own. And then the two separated, and all that was gone. And Rhyz'ir stared at Lotto with a newfound respect. They hadn't caught all the details, but the emotion…

There'd been a pervasive joy and excitement, but beneath that exterior there had been such turmoil. The awkwardness of a body that was small and clumsy and so very fragile; but that was the least of it. They felt a heart unsure of its allegiances as a War tore through their Cosmos; glimpsed the subterfuge of their own people, the sacrifice of a life just to right their wrongs. Disillusion, reluctance, yet acceptance of their fate as they were reborn in that stunted, voiceless form. And there was more yet; there was a deep yearning, a void waiting to be filled. A thirst for knowledge, for understanding of the beginnings of their own life. A curiosity buried under the tedium and frustrations of a dead-end job, a flame almost snuffed out; how familiar that was.

And yet Lotto had carried on, still carried on. Still did what they thought was right, enjoyed life to its fullest extent even when it was not perfect. All that from the merest touch, the faintest brush of minds; such simple grace! What were a knife, a monster, a hollow crypt, next to power like that?

The message was clear; a conclusion so stark, so self-evident that it had not needed to be conveyed beyond its premise.

Lotto had faced their choices, and lived with the consequences. *Why couldn't you?*

That was the look Lotto gave them before darting out of sight as a figure rushed into the hall, one Rhyz'ir recognised instantly.

Nzhi'ax. Younger, brighter, more full of life. So focused on their own suffering, they had not noticed until now the sadness and the weariness which inhabited her older self, the faint air of melancholy. Perhaps her path, her future, had not been as perfect as Rhyz'ir, in their jealousy, had allowed themself to think. Perhaps…

They gripped the knife behind their back.

"*Rhyz'ir*! What in the name of sanity are you doing here? I thought you said you were heading back to the lab for one final analysis!".

"I… I was —"

"Well you'd better hurry," she replied, "the selection board won't wait for you if you're late."

Rhyz'ir stared at her, trying to summon the will to do what they thought they needed to do.

"H-hey, I don't mean to stress you out," the younger Censere spoke again; "Gods, you look like *crap*. Don't tell me you pulled an all-nighter — hey. Hey. It'll be okay. Whatever happens — it's not the end of the universe Right?."

Rhyz'ir tried and tried, but nothing came, no violence, no thirst for blood, no righteous anger; the rage was all gone, replaced with… regret. They stood there, helpless, motionless, a stranger to themself. What were they *doing*? Throwing away their life, contemplating *murder* — not just any murder, but that of their own friend?

And Nzhi'ax *was* their friend; they'd let their pet theory blow everything she did out of proportion, but just looking at her now, before all of it… What had they been *thinking*?

"D-don't worry…" Rhyz'ir said, as composed as they could. "Go on, I'll catch up, I promise".

"Seriously. You alright, Rhyz'ir?"

"Yes, yes, just… nervous is all. My idea is a bit out there," Rhyz'ir replied with a self-deprecating smile.

It *had* been out there, hadn't it? Even if it had turned out to be right, it had been a long shot. They should've understood that a long time ago. Stuck to their guns, sure, but they should have understood the scepticism as something more than some devious attack on their life and their plans. Especially from her.

Nzhi'ax put a hand on his shoulder; they almost flinched at the touch, but resisted.

"Don't worry, Rhyz'ir. You're a good scientist, better than I am, and I know you're onto *something*. Hey, maybe not what you think you've got — but *something*. I think… I bet they'll know that too".

"No, you're better than I am — I — should've seen it sooner," Rhyz'ir choked out, then met her eyes, composing themself again as best they could. "…Don't be late, Nzhi'ax".

Nzhi'ax seemed to accept the compliment without false modesty; good old Nzhi'ax. Just because she was their friend didn't mean she had to be perfect. But there was no superiority, no victorious glee at the admission, in her smile.

"Don't be late either!" she said simply, instead of some cutting comment.

"I won't," Rhyz'ir replied as she disappeared down the corridor once more.

As she did, Rhyz'ir fell to their knees.

"What did I… I almost… *gods forgive me*…"

Lotto emerged into the hall once more, tail wagging as they barked happily. Then they rubbed their head against Rhyz'ir's legs once more.

"Lotto, I almost… how can you still…?"

Lotto barked to shut them up — then gestured back in the direction of the Ship. In a flash, Rhyz'ir recalled Nzhi'ax's predicament — remembered Reinbrand, who had almost convinced them to do something unforgivable. They almost ran back, in a whole new kind of blind rage —

— but no. They were a scientist. Not a ghost, not an avenger, certainly not a killer.

So they paused, and they *thought*.

"Lotto," they said after a moment, their voice clipped and precise, their mind clear at last. "You could fly my Ship, couldn't you?"

An affirmative yip.

"Think you could fly *that* one?"

Lotto hesitantly nodded.

"Then I have an idea."

* * *

"Aah… Think of it. Only a few more minutes, Nezzia, old girl — and then you'll be a *paradox*."

Reinbrand had made no effort to pronounce Nzhi'ax's name correctly, but he didn't feel she had any room to complain. After all, he had just gone through the trouble of attaching a healing band to the Censere's injured leg.

"Dear, dear, how I wish you weren't such a precious resource… I would have enjoyed cutting you up *ever* so much. Back home, there was a man…" He giggled hollowly. "You'd have hated him. Best vivisector I ever knew. Taught me all the tricks. But don't worry — in a few moments, that paradox blood of yours will be liquid gold. We can't go wasting a drop — you're my ticket out of here! No, my dear, once you're full-cooked, I'll bleed you nice and slow, with no funny business. You'll hardly feel a thing."

Nzhi'ax forced out a guttural, despairing moan.

"Oh, don't fret, bug-girl," her captor tutted. "You're already dead! Rizzy will have taken care of that, oh… centuries ago. Or a few seconds from now. Matter of perspective."

Nzhi'ax moaned again; something shorter, a protest.

"Enough of your cheek!" he mock-scolded her. "Don't you see? You should be honoured. This is only the beginning; I'll do great things with the energy you'll give me, oh yes. Today, your vascular system — tomorrow, the world! The world of Locus, to be exact," he chuckled.

He was done with his medical ministrations, now, and he parted from the altar, dancing round the darkened crypt while the device fastened to her legs.

"What a sight," he crowed. "What a *scheme*! What a stroke of luck to find it, what a stroke of genius to think how to use it!"

He spoke as if he really could see everything he spoke of, and Nzhi'ax believed it. His eyes glistened with madness.

"Do you understand? Can't you taste it on the wind? The New Order! I'll drag it back into the brimstone of War, this glorious, ruined planet — and then… And then, I shall claim it as my own. There's a bit of a bug problem,

of course, but that shouldn't be too hard to get sorted. I shall be the Father, the Minister, the Priest, of a new Empire of the Fallen. Just think of it! *Father Reinbrand* of the *Locus-Fallen*! Father Reinbrand, Lord of All! …And all thanks to little Rhizzy."

She had stayed slack throughout the raving tirade, but at that name, Nzhi'ax roused, shaking her head in denial. Reinbrand laughed.

"What, you think our mutual friend won't do it? You *really* think so? *Please*! After you betrayed them twice, ruined their life — after I offered them *everything*?"

Nzhi'ax nodded. Conviction even in the face of almost certain death; Reinbrand could almost respect it. Mostly, however, he thought it was hilarious. With the process complete, he placed the healing device to the side and laughed once more.

"Oh, bug-girl, you're a card. You're almost as naive as those children…"

Then the Ship's door swung open, and a voice called out his name.

"*Reinbrand!*"

"What!?"

Reinbrand spun round to see Rhyz'ir.

The knife in their hand was slick with green blood.

"It's done," they said, without preamble or elaboration.

"…Oh!" Reinbrand said, slackening in genuine relief. "Right. Yes. Good, good!"

"It's done," Rhyz'ir repeated, with a voice like steel. "Now give me the information."

"Yes, yes, of course! Give me a minute, old sport!" Reinbrand said with a laugh, pacing around the altar. "What, did you think I'd stiff you? Fair's fair! I do keep my end of a bargain struck — at least with people I like… and I'm really starting to like *you,* bug," Reinbrand finished with a grin. "Almost hope

you'll stick around once Time catches up with you and your little girlfriend. I could use a guy like you on this ship."

Rhyz'ir held out their hand demandingly. Reinbrand halted.

"Oh, but then you'll run off, and the game will be over!" he complained, in the voice of a spoiled child. "You can't leave just like that — go on, indulge me! I need to know how it *felt*! How hungry you were for revenge! How good it felt to take her life!"

"You take far too much pleasure in murder, Reinbrand."

"You take far too little," Reinbrand replied dismissively. "I wish my first kill had had the potential to be as significant, as *tasty* as yours. Your childhood friend, your greatest enemy! My first was just some boy I didn't know. Frankly, I don't know if I could have stomached gutting someone I knew, not *then;* you impress me, you really do. So *enjoy* it!"

Rhyz'ir approached; their face was still as blank as the madman's mask.

"You murdered a *child*?" they asked.

Their tone could almost have been conversational. Reinbrand clearly took it as such, ambling toward the insectoid as if to shake their hand.

"Oh yeah," he recalled. "Little boy alone in the rain. All too easy." Then he cocked their head, a hint of suspicion showing at last — but all too little. "What's it to *you*?"

"Oh, it's good," Rhyz'ir said, stretching; the casualness of the gesture was enough to soothe the villain's mind once more. "It's very good."

"You flatter me," Reinbrand said with a polite laugh — then blinked, realising he didn't actually understand why Rhyz'ir had just said that. "…Why?"

"Oh," Rhyz'ir replied, "it's only that I was worried I'd still have a modicum of sympathy for you."

Reinbrand didn't even have time to blink before something hard and heavy *struck* him on the back of the head, colliding with his helmet like a hammer

with a gong; the blow was enough to dent the metal and get at the skull beneath. The damn thing had always been for show, more than anything else.

"*What —*"

Reinbrand half-whirled, swaying on one foot, and saw Nzhi'ax, unbound, unhurt, the metallic healing device still clutched in one hand.

"Not so easy now I have the jump on you instead, *is it*?"

Reinbrand fell to his knees, heaved on all four, staggered to his feet — he clutched at his head. His vision was blurring, the walls were shaking. His shadows…

"H… how did you… get…?"

"You were too focused on me, Reinbrand," said Rhyz'ir — and then they gestured to Lotto with their other hand, the one they'd kept behind their back — a hand whose palm was open in a bleeding, self-inflicted gash. "What was it you called them? Weak? Pathetic? *Not at all important*?"

Reinbrand laughed shakily, even through the red blood spilling through the gaps in his mask.

"Oh clever, clever…" He choked out the words through a hacking cough. "Take it you didn't have the guts to go through with it, eh, bug?"

Rhyz'ir approached Reinbrand, who seemed to slip backwards into the shadows even as he didn't move. Or was it the shadows which had slipped forward, surrounding him like armour?

Lotto barked in alarm and jumped at Reinbrand, knocking him off balance. Lotto was thrown to the ground by a force none of them could see — none, save perhaps for Reinbrand himself. *The spirits*!

Now positions were reversed; Rhyz'ir saw Reinbrand's evil eyes bore into the downed mammal, ready to pounce, five-fingered hands poised to strangle —

Oh no you don't.

Reinbrand never made it as far as getting back up. He looked down, confused, and saw a blade sticking out of his chest. Still holding the handle of the knife was Rhyz'ir.

"This enough 'guts' for you?"

"Hah!" Reinbrand laughed. "I always… knew you had it in you… heh, bet you thought I was gonna… nevermind…" The man coughed blood into Rhyz'ir's face. "They'll never… believe you now…"

Then he fell backwards, helmet clunking against the floor of his Ship. In that same moment, the strange, neon lights died away, and the crypt-like room was plunged, once more, into darkness — save for the natural light still streaming in from the courtyard outside the doors.

"Rhyz'ir? Are you…?"

The knife clattered to the ground as they turned.

"I… killed him…"

"*He* was a killer," Nzhi'ax said, rushing to their side. "He murdered a dozen people at *least* — he was *dangerous*. It was self-defence. Hey — hey. You're going to be alright..

Rhyz'ir turned to her, eyes wide and helpless.

"But it's not just him," they babbled — "I was gonna… I wanted to… you… I'm so — I'm so sorry —"

"*I'm* sorry, Rhyz'ir," Nzhi'ax cut them off, unburdening her own emotions to quench the flood of Rhyz'ir's own. Her voice trembled. "This is all my fault. I was angry with you — he offered to show me the secrets of his Higher-Dimensional Ship. He told me… so much about his time. You're *right*, Rhyz'ir, about the Big Bang, about other Universal Islands, about the legends. About everything."

"What? But… but…"

Rhyz'ir shook their head, weakly at first, then with renewed conviction.

"No… no. *I'm* sorry, Nzhi'ax. I'm the one at fault — the one who cut corners to prove I was right, who took your rightful scientific objections as attacks against me. Who was willing to actually consider… it was only thanks to Lotto that I didn't…"

The two heard a faint whine coming from where Lotto had landed. Rhyz'ir ran over.

"*Lotto*!"

Lotto had their paws over a large streak of blood across their chest, trying desperately to halt the bleeding.

"Nzhi'ax! Lotto needs help! They're injured!"

Nzhi'ax ran over as well, holding out the metal device — still slick with Reinbrand's crimson blood. The same colour as Lotto's, under that purple skin; they wondered if that was significant.

"Here," Nzhi'ax urged. "He — Reinbrand used this to heal my leg!"

Rhyz'ir took the device and pressed it over Lotto's injury. To their shock, the flesh began to grow out, interweaving with itself as it closed the scratch.

"It's working!" She hadn't believed it herself, and cried out with joy. "Rhyz'ir, it's working!"

"Don't worry Lotto, y-you'll be alright! You're going to be alright!"

But Lotto was not soothed; instead they barked in alarm, flicking their head to gesture back over to where Reinbrand's body lay. When they turned, the two Censere found it gone, along with his swarm of shadows; that remained was his mask, stained and broken at the back, lying in a pool of blood. A trail of the thick, scarlet ichor led out through the doors of the ship.

"Oh, gods. That deceitful, two-timing, theatrical —"

Rhyz'ir was about to give chase, but Nzhi'ax held them down, preventing them from getting up.

"Wh —"

"Lotto's slipping away! I need you *here*!" she snapped at them. "Who cares if a half-dead maniac runs off into the night — he said it himself, he can't do too much damage without people to make deals with. History won't let him"

Lotto let out a high-pitched whine, their eyes squeezed shut. Rhyz'ir didn't know whether that was a reply to what Nzhi'ax had just said, and if so, what it meant — or if, perhaps, it was just a cry of pain.

It didn't matter, did it? Nzhi'ax was right. This was more important than any revenge.

"We need to get this ship working," they said. "It's got to fly. We need to get back to our own time, get them help."

"Can you do that?"

"I *have* to," Rhyz'ir replied, almost crying, yet the picture of determination.

Rhyz'ir couldn't let Lotto die, not after all they had done for them.

"Reinbrand said… Reinbrand said all it took was power and thought," Nzhi'ax reminded them.

"I'd say that's power," said Rhyz'ir, pointing at Reinbrand's blood on the floor, which was made of the same strange, porous material as the altar; already the crimson patches were thinning to the naked eye. "And I reckon the two of us… can manage a bit of thought."

* * *

"Nzhi'ax!" Rhyz'ir called out. "I'm headed off to the hospital wing, they said Lotto's finally come around" Rhyz'ir called out.

"In the middle of our analysis?" Nzhi'ax looked up. "Do you want to prove the red dwarf above us is ten billion years older than it should be, or *don't* you? I swear I'm the only one who really believes in this stuff."

Rhyz'ir glared across the lab at Nzhi'ax — who chuckled. "I'm kidding, go see them! This work'll be here when you get back!"

Rhyz'ir cracked a smile, before leaving the lab.

A lot had changed in the last few months. Not that it had all been — to coin a phrase — sunshine and roses. When the authorities had shown up at Nzhi'ax's lab, both of them had had quite the time, explaining the whole business with Reinbrand as best they could, all while impressing upon them the importance and the urgency of getting Lotto taken to proper medical facilities. The device had clearly had an effect, but it hadn't stopped them slipping into some kind of coma; they had to get their friend examined, and fast. Who knew what could go wrong?

In the end, the two had been detained for several days — until security footage of Reinbrand's escape in one of the cradle ships was recovered and they were acquitted. By that point, however, they'd been informed of Lotto's condition. The healing device, they now understood, accelerated the natural healing process — and, in the absence of a ready sacrifice, it used the patient's own life-force to power that process. Lotto's injury had been near fatal, which meant that the healing of it had put them into what, in any known species, would've been a permanent coma.

For all that, less than a week after admission, Lotto was already showing unprecedented signs of cellular regeneration; they were recovering, slowly, but they were recovering.

Rhyz'ir had stuck with Nzhi'ax on Locus, and once they'd offered their condolences to the families, friends, clans and kin of her previous labmates — the unfortunate souls whom Reinbrand had massacred to heal himself — Rhyz'ir had begun working in the lab, as Nzhi'ax set out to prove the Big Bang. *Rigorously*, this time — without shortcuts or assumptions.

As for Reinbrand's Higher-Dimensional Ship, the Universal Cooperation Council's central government had impounded it at their request, and reported its destruction. Rhyz'ir didn't particularly believe that last bit, but it scarcely mattered, so long as it was out of Reinbrand's reach — wherever he was now.

So here they were, safe and free and friends again — heading down the elevator to the medical floor of Locus's core Cradle, ready to finally see Lotto, after a month of worry.

Only, as the door to the floor opened, it was clear the staff were worked up about something. That something unusual had happened.

Rhyz'ir approached the desk.

"Hello," they said when no one acknowledged their presence — "I'm Rhyz'ir. I'm… here to see Lotto." Those two names seemed to get the clerk's attention. "What's going on here??"

"…Lotto's gone," they admitted. "Some xertonoids appeared in their room and just — took them."

"What?" Rhyz'ir's blood ran cold. "*Xertonoids*? What kind? Robes? Helmets?"

"What — ?" the desk staff clerk. "Robes, maybe — why helmets? No, there weren't any of — look, I don't know about any of this, all I know is that Lotto left a message on their patient computer, specifically addressed to 'Rhyz'ir'. We haven't yet looked at it".

"Well… I *am* Rhyz'ir," they repeated. "You can check my biodata records if you don't believe me".

"No, no, that won't be necessary," the staff member sighed, and handed them a tablet. "Read on."

Rhyz'ir looked down at the tablet in their hand. The message was written in the default font, in black and white; no personal touches, no pictures, no signature. Yet the words were unmistakably Lotto's — though they were the first true language Rhyz'ir had gotten from them. How strange that realisation felt.

'*Dear Rhyz'ir,*' the message read —

'*Sorry I can't stay to see you, you know how it is. Maybe. My people want me back — right now. At least they allowed me to leave you this, so I'll be quick. Thanks for everything, and don't worry about thanking me back. I already know. You probably have a lot of questions, and I can't answer many of them, but I can give you <u>this</u>:*'

Rhyzir's gaped as they scrolled down. An incredibly complex equation was embedded into the document.

'*It's such a complicated equation your software thinks of it as an image, not words. So I can make it show up with my mind. Anyway, that should give you a coordinate system for*

outside your galaxy. Use it, jump a probe far enough away and you should be able to detect the Big Bang. It's the least I can do to repay you for saving my life.

Best of luck,

Lotto.'

Rhyz'ir stared at the tablet for a moment — then looked at the clerk again with newfound urgency. "C-can I take this with me?"

"As long as you bring it back within twenty four hours," they recited. "But, look, we're all freaking out over here — what was in the message?"

"Well, you can tell the staff to calm down. Tell them Lotto's just been discharged by a higher authority," Rhyz'ir improvised. After a moment's thought, they added: "They're going home."

The staff member took a moment to process what Rhyz'ir had said — then sighed with relief, and picked up their desk phone to spread the word while Rhyz'ir headed back out of the medical floor to the elevator.

"Thanks, Lotto…" they muttered to themselves. It helped to say the words. "Thank you so much. I'm so sorry I couldn't tell you in person, but… thank you. Thank you for saving my life".

And they gazed out the window, across the city, bathed in the glow of the red dwarf above. A city spinning around a planet, around a star, in a Universal Island which, for the first time in the history of their civilization, was about to realise they were not alone in the darkness.

* * *

Agent 'Lotto IV' - Report 53/05-102/17 #26

OK, I know I said *one* more report, but it took a lot longer than I thought to write up everything that happened.

So — recap of the important information, because I know you guys care more about that than the friends I made…

Archivist's Note: Report 53/05-102/17 #25 has been discarded due to lack of relevant information not covered by this report.

Firstly, the Stellarian Spiral Galaxy is still around in the far future, or rather its stars are, as part of the Universal Island… you know what I mean.

Archivist's Note: Along with M31 (known to the lesser species as Andromeda), M33 (k.l.s. Triangulum), and the rest of the M31 Group, the Stellarian Spiral Galaxy (k.l.s. the Milky Way or simply the Galaxy) was previously believed destroyed by the Great Attractor in 65,015,120,110 A.D. as a result of early battles in the Cosmic War. It is now supposed that the alterations to history caused by the more recent Battle of the Maw are responsible for their joint survival as M31-G-MR (k.l.s. the Universal Island).

Secondly, the Censere still live there; thought that might mean something to you lot, apparently their ancestors were around in human times as well, though I've never heard of them before.

Archivist's Note: The Censere are a lesser species native to the planets 'Censeron' and 'Alkydron', one of many whose history has been affected to a significant but ultimately bounded extent by the War. It was not previously believed they were of any significance in the history of the Stellarian Spiral Galaxy, as their initial Empire fell in the 29th Century A.D. to a rival space power; the circumstances of their apparent long-term survival are to be studied by the appropriate operatives as constraints permit.

Thirdly, their homeworld in this era, 'Locus', just so happens to be the ruins of our good old Morning Star. A copy, obviously, but I believe it's worth mentioning anyway. Not every day you see the Cathedral of Time in ruins and a mortal city blooming from its wreckage.

Archivist's Note: No extrapolation of the Morning Star (see 'Multiplication Operations Record - Bifurcation Project - Spatial Parameters') is known to have been positioned in that time-zone. All instances of the Morning Star are believed to be destroyed or relocated before entering this time-zone. It should be noted that whilst encounters with unknown doppelganger-worlds are not unprecedented, it is to be considered of imminent concern to the Military Councils of both our Cathedral and its matermundis if such an encounter should occur with a post-active instance of the Morning Star. Appropriate transmissions of information have been carried out in accordance with cross-variant encryption protocols and the messengers duly terminated.

Fourthly, Reinbrand is not base-human, or at least not anymore. Is *that* what it means to be 'Fallen'? You could've warned me! Judging by the transcripts of Rhyz'ir and Nzhi'ax's testimonies, he'd been stabbed in the heart and then he got back up. Could be he recorporated, could be something else; his old body was gone, either way.

Oh, and one last thing, 'cause I know you're thinking it — no, there's no strategic value in the Universal Island whatsoever, even if the opposing forces didn't know about it. It's two and a half trillion light years from the next nearest galaxy, through the lesser black void — and it's nowhere near the core of human-descended territory in the far future, which according to your records is known as the Virgo Cluster in the current era.

Archivist's Note: Surprisingly enough, subsequent surveys by remote field agents have revealed the above to be a credible statement, despite initial suspicions that Agent Lotto IV was merely attempting to divert military attention away from the home of their so-called 'friends'. The 'Universal Island' is indeed far from the core of posthumanity in the relevant era — centred in the former M87 — it is generally isolated, and it is, in short, of little strategic importance as an outpost beyond the outskirts of history.

OK, report over.

Now that I've written all three of them, can I *please* go back to the Ishiok?

Ever since my most recent change, it feels like you've been calling me more and more. I've barely had time to get used to this body in the place I call home, and quite frankly I could do with a break after what you and Reinbrand put me through this time.

Archivist's Note: Out of consideration for physical trauma endured in the course of duty, Agent Lotto IV was indeed granted a reprieve after this mission.

OK, done now.

Lotto out.

Oh that's cool, I'm gonna sign out like that all the time now.

<u>Archivist's Note:</u> Although Agent Lotto IV's closing remarks have been kept here for posterity, subsequent attempts to sign out like this on the part of the Agent have been altered to the proper form of address.

<u>Report Ends</u>

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